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ABSTRACT

The West Virginia University Cooperative Extension Service developed a 4-H curriculum designed to provide targeted potential school dropouts with opportunities to develop specific skills. These included decisionmaking, parliamentary procedure, group processes, public speaking, leadership, and life skills. In addition, participants would have successful, noncompetitive learning experiences that were experiential. The extension agent developed and updated curriculum content, schedules, and training materials; secured funding; recruited, trained, and supported volunteers and school personnel; developed evaluation tools; and conducted formal and informal evaluations. During the third year of the project (1988-89), the program reached approximately 150 Marion County (West Virginia) students in grades 3-5 who had been identified by school personnel as potential dropouts. At the end of the year, each participant was evaluated by volunteer group leader, classroom teacher, and self. The program was successful in having positive effects on the skills, attitudes, and knowledge of high-risk students. The positive things happening in the 4-H club also transferred into regular classroom work and attitudes. The program had a positive influence on most participants in the areas of school and community or church activities, leadership roles, task completion, self-esteem, respect for authority, attitude toward school, cooperation with group, responsibility, communication skills, peer relationships, school success, willingness to try, following directions, and self-control. (SV)

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YOUTH-AT-RISK AND 4-H... PARTNERS IN SUCCESS

AN EVALUATION OF A COUNTY 4-H DROP-OUT PREVENTION MODEL

Introduction

According to several national reports, the number of young people's dropping out of schools has been steadily increasing since the early 1970's. In comparison to the dropout rate of 25 to 30% on a national level, West Virginia's dropout rate in 1986-87 was 17.4%. Comparatively, Marion County's dropout rate is 16.39%. although it appears the state and county rate may be slightly lower than the national average, there are many different methods used to calculate dropout rates. Therefore, comparisons based entirely on figures should be made with caution.

In our complex and highly technological society, school dropouts are likely to encounter a series of costly personal difficulties and place undue economic and social burdens upon society through welfare and unemployment assistance, lost revenue, and crime. It has been estimated that each school drop-out will cost society $1.2 million dollars throughout his/her lifetime. This is particularly costly for the state of West Virginia which leads the nation in such things as unemployment, taxation, low salaries, welfare recipients, and economic depression.

This intervention strategy for drop-out prevention has been developed by the West Virginia University Cooperative Extension Service in conjunction with the West Virginia Department of Education. The broad goal of this program is to increase the number of students who remain in school and receive a high school diploma, or conversely, decrease the percentage of students who drop out of school.

In order to achieve this goal, some specific objectives have been developed. This 4-H curriculum is designed to provide targeted potential school dropouts with the opportunities to: (a) improve decision making skills, (b) learn basic parliamentary procedure and group decision making processes, (c) learn public speaking skills, (d) participate in successful, non-competitive learning experiences, (e) participate in "learn by doing" educational activities, (f) participate in organized group activities, (g) develop leadership and life skills, and (h) develop positive relationships with others.

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Methodology

Participants

In 1986-87 this project involved 90 students in 3rd through 5th grades who had been identified by school personnel as potential dropouts, in traditional 4-H clubs within the curriculum of 2 Marion County public schools. In 1987-88 the number grew to 131 students in 3 schools. During the 1988-89 year the program reached approximately 150 students in 7 groups in 5 schools, and in 1989-90 the program will reach approximately 200 students in 7 groups in 4 schools. Over a 4 year period approximately 575 students, 150 volunteers, and 40 school personnel will have been involved in the program.

Instructional Methods and Delivery Systems

Students were primarily involved in experiential, "learn by doing" activities. By holding offices, serving on committees, and conducting their own business meetings, they learned parliamentary procedure, duties of officers, and committee functions. They explored potential careers and learned constructive leisure time activities through small group instruction in different subject matter areas (they were actively involved in constructing different items). Public speaking skills were learned through visual presentations and project talks. Human relationship skills were learned through interaction with others.

The learning experiences were guided by adult volunteers who were carefully selected for skills in a particular subject matter area and their abilities to relate, in a positive manner, to this type of individual.

Role of the Extension Agent in Program Development

The Extension Agent: (a) Developed and updated job descriptions for volunteers; (b) developed and updated curriculum content and schedule; (c) developed and updated training materials for volunteers; (d) recruited approximately 45 volunteers a year from the community (included businesses which gave release time to employees to serve as project leaders, WVU Engineering School students, Fairmont State College students, 4-H teen leaders, and community residents) to meet on a weekly basis with these 4-H clubs; (e) trained volunteers; (f) trained and supported school personnel; (g) supported volunteers and school personnel in program delivery; (h) developed evaluation tools; (i) secured funding; (j) supported volunteers; (k) developed positive relationship and frequent communication with school personnel and county administrative officials; (l) conducted informal and formal evaluations; (m) assisted in compiling county data into a state report.

Role of Public School Faculty and Staff in Program Implementation

Classroom teachers and guidance counselors in each school: (a) assisted with training meetings for volunteers; (b) attended weekly 4-H club meetings; (c) served as primary disciplinarians for meetings; (d) served as school liaisons for volunteers on such matters as physical space, needed materials, problems, etc.); (e) were responsible for the youth in the event an adult volunteer

could not fulfill his/her duties; (f) assisted with program evaluations; (g) assisted adult volunteers in any way needed during the actual meetings of the groups; (h) worked with students on parliamentary procedure, visual presentations, etc. during the school week; (i) make sure the group functioned smoothly on a day-to-day and week-to-week basis.

Evaluation Methodology

Over the completed 3 year period the following evaluation methods were used: (1) pre and post-test of the students involved; (2) comparison of base line data, i.e. attendance records, grades; (3) observations and written evaluations of classroom teachers; and (4) observations and written evaluations of volunteers.

For the 1988-89 program year, the most recently completed evaluation, only a post-evaluation was conducted. Data were collected through questionnaires specifically designed for this study. The questionnaires, which were hand distributed and collected, were completed by all participants, classroom teachers, and adult volunteers. The data in this paper were based on 143 participants during the 1988-89 year. All data were entered into a Zenith 248 personal computer, and the PC File+ program was used to tabulate frequencies. The frequencies were converted into percentages by hand.

The classroom teachers (N=143) evaluated each participant on 12 variables using a 3 point scale. The subject matter volunteers (N=152) evaluated each participant on 11 of the same variables using a 3 point scale. Each participant (N=143) rated him/herself on twelve variables using a three point scale. Participation levels of students were also recorded by key volunteers.

Findings

We cannot actually assess whether or not this program has kept students in school until they graduate since participants have not yet reached graduation age. However, written evaluations and observations of participants indicate the program has a very definite positive influence on many participants.

Based on 1988-89 results, evaluations by subject matter volunteers indicate that 50% or more of the students showed "some" or "great" improvement on all 11 variables. They also indicated that only between 15% and 36% of the students needed "no improvement" on the 11 variables (See Table 1).

Classroom teacher evaluations indicated that between 63% and 84% of the students showed "some" or "great" improvement on nine of the 12 variables. On those same 9 variables, the teachers indicated between 7% and 23% of the participants needed no improvements. On the remaining 3 variables, teachers indicated that between 15% and 49% showed "some" or "great" improvement, while between 33% and 59% needed "no" improvement (See Table 2).

Between 57% and 84% of the participants indicated they liked 8 of the 12 components of the 4-H club experience. Between 40% and 49% of the participants indicated they like 3 other components. The lowest rated activity was "giving a 'show and tell' talk." While only 28% of the participants indi-

cated they liked this activity, an additional 22% said they did not do it. Only 20% indicated they didn't like it (See Table 3).

Through the observation of guidance counselors, volunteers, teachers, and extension agent, there are several success stories that can be reported to date. Some selected successes include:

(1) Students are volunteering to give visual presentations within their club.

(2) Students have participated in the county visual presentation contest and have advanced to the state contest.

(3) Students have demonstrated the knowledge they have gained through their project workshops.

(4) Students have been willing and eager to stay after school to receive training in the offices to which they were elected.

(5) Students enthusiastically shared their 4-H experiences with their teachers and principals.

(6) Other students are begging to join the 4-H club.

(7) Students have continued their project work at home (i.e. sewing puppets out of fabric and tearing an engine apart).

(8) One of the worst behavior problems in one school was elected vice-president of one of the clubs and also named a crew chief when working on engines.

(9) Students have gone out of their way to interact with adult volunteers when they are seen in different settings in the community.

(10) Students have learned social skills (ex: boys learned how to wear a boutonniere and that it was not "sissy").

(11) Students are enthused about working on committees and readily volunteer to serve.

(12) Some students have chosen to work on school improvement projects as a community service effort. For the first time, they are enthused about doing something for their school.

(13) All of the fifth grade students (100%) at one school said that 4-H experience had been enjoyable and were looking forward to another year with 4-H.

(14) Students who had no concept of business meetings, duties of officers, or how committees function prior to their 4-H experience could describe characteristics, duties, and responsibilities of all by the end of the year.

(15) By the end of the year students were self-motivated to assume responsibility for various tasks and were enthusiastic about doing things for their club and school. Most were dependable in carrying out their responsibilities (ex: with very little help from adult advisers, a group of girls designed and hand made all the invitations to their project exhibit during the last week of school).

(16) Some LD students who were involved in 4-H at "school A" were scheduled to go to "school B". The students and their parents did not want to go to "school B" because they did not have a 4-H program there. As a result, the classroom teachers, guidance counselor, and principal all requested, through the county superintendent, that 4-H clubs be established at "school B".

(17) The mother of one of the girls walked approximately four miles to attend the project exhibit and reception that was held for the 4-H members during the last week of school.

(18) One of the boys who had taken small engines is practically living at the home of the small engines instructor.

(19) The classroom teachers at one school indicated that they could see some real positive changes in the students both as individuals and how they worked together in a group. They could definitely relate these changes to the 4-H experience.

(20) The fifth grade class at one school decided they wanted to have a surprise party for their teacher. They appointed a chairperson, had a committee, and planned the entire party on their own without any adult supervision.

Conclusions

This particular model has been successful in making a positive difference in the skills, attitudes, and knowledge of "high risk" students.

Volunteer project leaders saw a higher percentage of young people who needed "no improvements" than did the classroom teachers. The young people may have exhibited more positive behaviors in the 4-H club setting because of the positive relationship they developed with their adult volunteers and the interest they have shown in the 4-H club experience.

However, since classroom teachers did see "some",or "great", improvement in over 60% of the participants in so many areas, the positive things that are happening in the 4-H club are transferring into regular classroom work and attitudes.

From observations and written evaluations, the program has had a positive influence on most of the participants in the areas of (1) participation in school and community/church activities, (2) club leadership roles, (3) completion of tasks, (4) pride in accomplishments, (5) respect for authority, (6) self-concept, (7) attitude toward school, (8) working as part of a group, (9) being responsible (10) communication skills, (11) getting along with peers, (12) being successful in school, (13) being willing to try, (14) following directions, and (15) controlling their own behavior.

Although it has been successfully piloted and tested in a rural area, this model can be easily replicated in a variety of areas and locations.

Table 1
Marion County Summary
In-School 4-H Program
4-H Project Leader Observations
1988-1989

		PERCENTAGES OF IMPROVEMENTS				
		Needed None	No	Some	Great	Some or Great
1.	Gets Along With Peers	36	13	41	10	51
2.	Works As Part of The Group	28	18	34	19	53
3.	Feels Good About Self	30	17	38	14	52
4.	Feels Good About School	15	28	48	9	57
5.	Success In School	16	20	59	4	63
6.	Willing To Try	28	9	31	32	64
7.	Communication Skills	24	10	55	11	66
8.	Follows Directions	27	10	33	30	63
9.	Responsible In Completing Tasks	32	12	39	17	56
10.	Self-Controlled Behavior	33	14	41	12	53
11.	Respects Authority	36	13	39	11	50

N=152

NOTE: Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number. Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding.

Table 2
Marion County
In-School 4-H Program
Teacher Observations
1988-1989

(Completed by school personnel who was in best position to know students)

		PERCENTAGES OF IMPROVEMENTS				
		Needed None	No	Some	Great	Some or Great
1.	Gets Along With Peers	23	7	50	20	70
2.	Works As Part of The Group	11	10	53	26	79
3.	Feels Good About Self	12	11	61	16	77
4.	Feels Good About School	17	20	48	15	63
5.	Success In School	13	15	52	21	73
6.	Willing To Try	11	11	47	32	79
7.	Communication Skills	7	10	59	25	84
8.	Follows Directions	8	13	65	15	80
9.	Responsible In Completing Tasks	15	18	48	20	68
10.	Self-Controlled Behavior	33	18	34	15	49
11.	Respects Authority	43	16	35	6	41
12.	School Absences/Tardiness	59	26	14	1	15

N=143

NOTE: Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number. Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding.

Table 3
Marion County
In-School 4-H Program
Participants
1988-1989

	Did Not Do	Don't Like	It's Ok	Yes I Liked
Being In a 4-H Club	7	2	13	84
Telling Others About 4-H	8	12	30	49
Making Things In 4-H	2	4	10	84
Learning New Things	7	6	14	80
Working With Adults In 4-H	4	6	26	64
To Make Decisions	3	10	30	57
Being An Officer Or On A Committee	16	11	15	58
Making A Poster	22	12	26	40
Doing A Show and Tell Talk	22	20	30	28
Making A Motion	11	11	34	44
Going On A Club Trip or Tour	22	1	3	74
Helping On A Community Project	8	7	20	65

N=143

NOTE: Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number. Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding.